

Changing Mobilities, Shifting Futures

In my contribution I propose to focus on recent changes in patterns of mobility in order to grasp shifts in people's visions of the future. As an anthropologist I prefer to study ideas through their material expression (cf., for instance, Birgit Meyer's approach to religion through its 'materiality'). For present-day Africa, changing practices of mobility offer an apt entry point for tracing changes in visions of the future. This relates to a context of globalization (cf. its characteristic by Arjun Appadurai as increasing mobility of things, people and ideas). But for African societies there was always a particularly close link between mobility and visions of the future. Mobility was crucial for the reproduction of precolonial forms of authority, both in state and stateless societies. No wonder that colonial authorities were obsessed with fixing the 'floating populations,' seen as structural elements of disorder (Janet Roitman 2004). Yet, in practice colonial interventions encouraged new forms of mobility. Up till the present-day mobility remains a crucial element in people's reflections on the future.

All the more important that in many parts of the continent the 1990's brought some unexpected shifts in the patterns of mobility that had developed during the late colonial and post-colonial period. Since then relations had been marked by a particular form of urbanization, described as a rural-urban continuum (cf. Joseph Gugler 1971). Urbanites continued to take their relations to the village of birth most seriously, constantly returning there (cf. the burial 'at home' as a high point of 'belonging'). Such relations were crucial to the reproduction of patrimonial forms of politics and governance. However, especially since the 'post-Cold War moment' (Charles Piot 2010) these trans-local forms of solidarity seem to be under heavy pressure. New, adventurous forms of transcontinental migration (cf. the Cameroonian *bush-fallers*) make the ongoing commitment of migrants to the home community highly unsure. New forms of enrichment (the Nigerians 419's, the Cameroonian *feymen*) seem to break out of the city-village frameworks of belonging.

In this contribution I propose to address a few aspects of these shifts in mobility patterns, and explore their implications for people's visions of the future. I will mainly refer to Cameroonian examples – notably from the Grassfields, seen by many in the country as a vanguard of social change – but I will address also the broader relevance of these examples for the continent as a whole.

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